"Relativism"

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"Relativism" has many meanings. In order not to become confused by the "blind scholastic pedantry" that exhausts itself and its audience in the "clarification of meanings" so that it never meets the nonverbal issues, I shall work my way into our subject by examining the recent statement of a famous contemporary about "the cardinal issue," the fundamental political problem of our time. As a fundamental problem it is theoretical; it is not the problem of particular policies, but the problem of the spirit that should inform particular policies. That problem is identified by Isaiah Berlin as the problem of freedom.[1]

Berlin distinguishes two senses of freedom, a negative and a positive sense. Used in the negative sense, in which it was used by "the classical English political philosophers" or "the fathers of liberalism," "freedom" means "freedom *from*": "Some portion of human existence must remain independent of social control"; "there ought to exist a certain minimum area of personal freedom which must on no account be violated."[2] Positive freedom, on the other hand, is "freedom *for*": the freedom of the individual "to be his own master" or to participate in the social control to which he is subject.[3] This alternative regarding freedom overlaps another alternative: freedom for the empirical self or freedom for the true self. Still, negative freedom, freedom from, is more likely

to mean freedom for the empirical self; whereas positive freedom, freedom for, has to a higher degree the tendency to be understood as freedom only for the true self and therefore as compatible with the most extreme coercion of the empirical selves to become something that their true selves allegedly desire.[4]

The freedom that Berlin cherishes is the negative freedom for "our poor, desire-ridden, passionate, empirical selves": [5] "a maximum degree of noninterference compatible with the minimum demands of social life" [6] or the "freedom to live as one prefers." [7] He seems to cherish that freedom as "an end in itself" or "an ultimate value." [8] He certainly does not believe that the older reasoning in favor of negative freedom is valid. For, contrary to the older view, negative freedom is not the "necessary condition for the growth of human genius": "Integrity, love of truth and fiery individualism grow at least as often in severely disciplined communities or under military discipline, as in more tolerant or indifferent societies"; negative freedom is a peculiarly Western ideal and even a peculiarly modern Western ideal, and even in the modern Western world it is cherished by some individuals rather than by large masses; there is no necessary connection between negative freedom and democracy.[9]

Berlin finds the true justification of negative freedom in the absurdity of the alternative. The alternative is the notion that men can be free only by participating in *the* just, *the* rational or *the* perfect society in which all just or rational ends of all members of society are harmoniously satisfied or in which everyone obeys only himself, i.e., his true self. This notion presupposes that there is a hierarchy, and therefore a fundamental harmony, of human ends. But this presupposition is "demonstrably false"; it is based on a "dogmatic and a priori certainty"; it is "not compatible with empiricism," i.e., with "any doctrine founded on knowledge derived from experience of what men are and seek"; it is the root of "the metaphysical view of politics" as opposed to the "empirical" view.[10] Experience shows us that "the ends of men are many, and not all of them in principle are compatible with each other. . . . The necessity of choosing between absolute

claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition. This gives its value to freedom . . . as an end in itself and not as a temporary need. . . ." [11]

Experience, knowledge of the observable Is, seems to lead in a perfectly unobjectionable manner to knowledge of the Ought. The allegedly empirical premise would seem to be the equality of all human ends. "Mill, and liberals in general, at their most consistent . . . wish the frontiers between individuals and groups of men to be drawn solely with a view to preventing collisions between human purposes, all of which must be considered to be equally ultimate, uncriticizable ends in themselves. Kant and the rationalists of his type do not regard all ends as of equal value." From the context it appears that the ends that are to be regarded as equal include "the various personal aims which their individual imagination and idiosyncrasies lead men to pursue." [12]

Interference with the pursuit of ends is legitimate only to the extent to which one man's pursuit of an end collides with another man's pursuit. Yet it appears that such collisions cannot possibly be prevented: "The possibility of conflict—and of tragedy—can never be wholly eliminated from human life, either personal or social." [13] Not all collisions, but only certain kinds of collisions can and ought to be prevented by social control: "there must be *some* frontiers of freedom which nobody should ever be permitted to cross." [14] The frontiers must be of such a character as to protect a reasonably large area; it would not be sufficient to demand that every man must have the freedom to dream of the pursuit of any end he likes.

Yet the primary question concerns, not the location of the frontiers, but their status. Those frontiers must be "sacred." [15] They must be "absolute": "Genuine belief in the inviolability of a minimum extent of individual liberty entails some . . . absolute stand." [16] "Relativism," or the assertion that all ends are relative to the chooser and hence equal, seems to require some kind of "absolutism." Yet Berlin hesitates to go quite so far. "Different *names or natures* may be given to the rules" that determine those frontiers:

they may be called natural rights or the word of God, or Natural Law, or the demands of utility or of "the deepest interests of man"; I may believe them to be valid *a priori,* or assert them to be *my own subjective ends, or the ends of my society or culture.* What these rules or commandments will have in common is that they are accepted so widely, and are grounded so deeply in the actual nature of men as they have developed through history, as to be, by now, an essential part of what we mean by being a normal human being. Genuine belief in the inviolability of a minimum extent of individual liberty entails *some such absolute stand.*[17]

That is to say, the demand for the sacredness of a private sphere needs a basis, an "absolute" basis, but it has no basis; any old basis, any "such absolute stand" as reference to my own subjective will or the will of my society will do. It would be short-sighted to deny that Berlin's comprehensive formula is very helpful for a political purpose—for the purpose of an anti-Communist manifesto designed to rally all anti-Communists. But we are here concerned with a theoretical problem, and in this respect we are forced to say that Berlin contradicts himself. "Freedom from" and "freedom for" are "two profoundly divergent and irreconcilable attitudes to the ends of life . . . each of them makes absolute claims. These claims cannot both be fully satisfied. But . . . the satisfaction that each of them seeks is an ultimate value which . . . has an equal right to be classed among the deepest interests of mankind." [18] The absolute claim for a minimum private sphere cannot be fully satisfied; it must be diluted, for the opposite claim has an equal right. Liberalism, as Berlin understands it, cannot live without an absolute basis and cannot live with an absolute basis.

Let us consider more precisely the basis of liberalism as Berlin sees it. "What these rules and commandments [*sc.* that determine the frontiers of freedom that nobody should ever be permitted to cross] will have in common is that they are accepted so widely, are grounded so deeply in the actual nature of men as they have developed through history, as to be, by now, an essential part of what we mean by being a normal human being." [19] But Berlin had told us earlier that "the domination of this ideal has been the exception rather than the rule, even in the recent history of the West," [20] i.e., that the ideal of negative freedom is not natural to man as man. Let, then, the rules in question be natural to Western man as he is now. But what about the future?

It may be that the ideal of freedom to live as one wishes . . . is only the late fruit of our declining capitalist civilization: an ideal which . . . posterity will regard with . . . little comprehension. This may be so; but no sceptical conclusions seem to me to follow. Principles are no less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed.[21]

But it is also true that principles are not sacred merely in virtue of the fact that their duration cannot be guaranteed. We are still waiting to hear why Berlin's principles are regarded by him as sacred. If these principles are intrinsically valid, eternally valid, one could indeed say that it is a secondary question whether they will or will not be recognized as valid in the future and that if future generations despise the eternal verities of civilization, they will merely condemn themselves to barbarism. But can there be eternal principles on the basis of "empiricism," of the experience of men up to now? Does not the experience of the future have the same right to respect as the experience of the past and the present?

The situation would be entirely different if one could assume the possibility of a peak of experience, of an absolute moment in history, in which the fundamental condition of man is realized for the first time and in principle fully. But this would also mean that in the most important respect history, or progress, would have come to its end. Yet Berlin seems to take it for granted that in the most important respect history is unfinished or unfinishable. Hence, the ideal of negative freedom can only be "relatively valid" for him: it can be valid only for the time being. In entire accord with the spirit of our time, he quotes "an admirable writer of our time" who says: "To realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian." [22]

That is to say, not only are all our primary ends of relative

validity; even the end that suggests itself as necessary by virtue of the absolute insight into the relative validity of all our primary ends is likewise only relatively valid. On the other hand, the latter end, or the right position toward any primary end, is so absolutely valid that Berlin or his authority can build on it the absolute distinction between civilized men and barbarians. For this distinction, as set forth in the quoted passage, is obviously meant to be final and not to be subject to revision in the light of future experience.

Berlin cannot escape the necessity to which every thinking being is subject: to take a final stand, an absolute stand in accordance with what he regards as the nature of man or as the nature of the human condition or as the decisive truth and hence to assert the absolute validity of his fundamental conviction. This does not mean, of course, that his fundamental conviction is sound. One reason why I doubt that it is sound is that if his authority were right, every resolute liberal hack or thug would be a civilized man, while Plato and Kant would be barbarians.

Berlin's statement seems to me to be a characteristic document of the crisis of liberalism—of a crisis due to the fact that liberalism has abandoned its absolutist basis and is trying to become entirely relativistic. Probably the majority of our academic colleagues will say that no conclusion can be drawn against relativism from the inadequacies of Berlin's statement because these inadequacies arise from his wish to find an impossible middle ground between relativism and absolutism; if he had limited himself to saying that liberalism is merely his "own subjective end," not intrinsically superior to any other subjective end, that since the belief in liberalism is based on a value judgment, no case or no conclusive case can be made for or against liberalism, in other words, if he had not rejected the nonliberal positions as "barbarian," but had admitted that there is an indefinitely large variety of notions of civilization each of which defines barbarism in its own way, in brief, if he had remained within the confines of the positivism of our time, he would never have contradicted himself. Whether withdrawal to the citadel of that positivism or of unqualified "value relativism" overcomes the crisis of liberalism or whether it merely conceals that crisis is another question.

The case for relativism has been restated recently by Arnold Brecht. He takes issue with certain arguments against relativism that I had advanced. He is not impressed by my reasoning. He deals with it chiefly under the heading of "misrepresentations." Since I know Dr. Brecht to be a polite man, I was inclined to assume that he regarded it as impolite to accuse me of mere misunderstanding: relativism is not such a deep doctrine as to be likely to be misunderstood. He blames me for having ascribed to Max Weber the view that all values are of the same rank: Weber merely asserted that " ultimate" values are "equally indemonstrable." [23] This means, however, that, as far as we know and shall ever be able to know while living on earth, or before the tribunal of human reason, the ways of life recommended by Amos or by Socrates are equal in value to the way of life of specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart. And this assertion seems to me to be as absurd as the assertion that, as far as we know or shall ever be able to know, a man who is blind or mortally ill is as perfect regarding his body as a man free from all bodily defects.

Brecht blames me also for having seen "inconsistency in the fact that relativists cannot help using value judgments themselves."

> No scientific relativist would condemn words like cruelty, civilization, prostitution, or, for that matter, crime or slums, wherever they are used within a clear frame of reference as descriptive in accordance with known standards, *as long as these standards are not themselves at issue.*[24]

But, on the basis of relativism, the standards are necessarily at issue, since all value judgments are rationally questionable; the consistent relativist ought to use "value-impregnated expressions" only in quotation marks, if at all.

In the Appendix to his book, in a subsection entitled "Mis-

understandings," [25] Brecht reproaches me for having asserted that, according to relativism, "civilization is not intrinsically superior to cannibalism." He says:

Where and when has a scientific relativist ever asserted as a fact that civilization is *not* superior to cannibalism? Such apodictic negative statements would be quite contrary to the principles of Scientific Method.

I merely repeat that, according to the thesis of scientific relativism, as restated by Brecht, civilization is not, as far as we *know*, and shall ever be able to *know*, superior to cannibalism, provided that each—civilization as well as cannibalism—rests on an ultimate value of its own. This is to say nothing at all here of the fact that the use of the terms "civilizations" or "cultures" by scientific anthropology presupposes the abolition of the distinction between civilization and barbarism and therewith, in particular, the abolition of the distinction between civilization and cannibalism.

"The only question," Brecht continues, "that could be raised by some pedantic relativist or for the matter of methodological argument is, What is the scientific *evidence* for the superiority of noncannibalistic civilizations?" Since the question at issue is whether reason is completely unable to distinguish between right and wrong or noble and base, one must not be afraid of being pedantic. "How about civilizations," Brecht continues, "that abhor the eating of cattle or hogs?" Here Brecht seems to say that, according to scientific relativism, the eating of human beings has the same status as the eating of cattle or hogs.

Scientific Value Relativism . . . is at no loss to show the superiority of noncannibalism, once "superiority" is defined . . . in terms other than selfish satisfaction of personal or tribal passions and with reference to humanity . . . even if the term "superior" were used in a strictly selfish sense . . . Scientific Method would not be at the end of its resources; the long-run superiority of one pattern of behavior over another can often be demonstrated even when the question is solely that of personal satisfaction.

If scientific value relativism may be able to prove the superiority of civilization to cannibalism in terms of both selfish satisfaction and unselfish satisfaction, it would indeed seem that scientific value relativism can in principle prove the superiority of civilization to cannibalism. Or is the disjunction incomplete? Must it not be incomplete if relativism is to be maintained? Is the reference to the "definition" of superiority not tantamount to a reference to such incompleteness? Is there, then, something other than satisfaction (selfish or unselfish) that is equal in rank to satisfaction before the tribunal of human reason so that one can choose dissatisfaction (pain, suffering, anguish, failure) as one's ultimate value with the same right as satisfaction? And may not dissatisfaction justify cannibalism?[26]

Brecht concludes his argument with the remark that scientific value relativism does not deny "that there may be absolutely valid, divine standards of moral value; it merely negates that this can be shown with scientific means in a serious controversy conducted in good faith." Brecht also reproaches me for having contrasted the apparent humility with the hidden arrogance of relativism. In reply to this remark he says:

Scientific Value Relativism may indeed be too humble to offer a *scientific* decision on a question like this: whether the captain of a marooned crew ought to be condemned if he permitted his men to eat the flesh of other men killed in battle or by accident, when this was the only alternative to starving. Religious feeling and traditional education may tell us they should rather have starved, but this is no *scientific* decision.

Why did Brecht choose this example in preference to the example of men eating human flesh while they have other food in abundance? Can his science legitimate the "condemnation" of what we may call frivolous cannibalism without making assumptions

regarding "ultimate values" which that very science must regard as questionable? Besides, I gladly admit that Brecht's version of relativism is humble, since it is based on the Kantian distinction between the knowable phenomena and the unknowable thing-in-itself.[27]

According to the positivistic interpretation of relativism which prevails in present-day social science and which Brecht very feebly qualifies,[28] reason is unable to show the superiority of unselfish gratification to selfish gratification and the absurdity of any attainable ends "which imagination and idiosyncrasies lead men to pursue." From this it follows that a bachelor without kith and kin who dedicates his whole life to the amassing of the largest possible amount of money, provided he goes about this pursuit in the most efficient manner, leads, in principle, as rational a life as the greatest benefactor of his country or of mankind. The choice among attainable ends may be made *en pleine connaissance de cause,* i.e., in full clarity about the likely consequences of the choice; it cannot in itself be rational. Reason can tell us which means are conducive to which ends; it cannot tell us which attainable ends are to be preferred to other attainable ends. Reason cannot even tell us that we ought to choose attainable ends; if someone "loves him who desires the impossible," reason may tell him that he acts irrationally, but it cannot tell him that he ought to act rationally or that acting irrationally is acting badly or basely. If rational conduct consists in choosing the right means for the right end, relativism teaches in effect that rational conduct is impossible. Relativistic social science may therefore be said to be one branch of the rational study of nonrational behavior.

But in what sense is the study rational? Social science proceeds by inductive reasoning or is concerned with prediction or with the discovery of causes. Yet what is the status of the principle of causality in social science relativism? The moderate Brecht is satisfied with the assertion that as regards causality, scientific method is grounded on common sense; he himself is inclined toward what he calls the Kantian view according to which "the human mind is so structured as to be unable to think [or as he also says "to imagine"] that changes have no causes." [29] According to a more widely accepted view, the principle of causality is a mere assumption. There is no rational objection to the assumption that the universe may disappear at any moment, not only into thin air, but into absolute nothingness, and that this happening may be a vanishing, not only into nothing, but through nothing as well. What is true of the possible end of the world is true also of its beginning. Since the principle of causality is not intrinsically evident, nothing prevents us from assuming that the world has come into being out of nothing and through nothing. Not only has rationality disappeared from the behavior studied by science; the rationality of that study itself has become radically problematic. All coherence has gone. We are then entitled to say that positivistic science in general, and therefore positivistic social science in particular, is characterized by the abandonment of reason or the flight from reason. The flight from scientific reason, which has been noted with regret, is the reasonable reply to the flight of science from reason.

A Marxist writer, Georg Lukács, has written a history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German thought under the title *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft.*[30] I believe that many of us Western social scientists must plead guilty to this accusation. For obvious reasons we must be especially interested in Lukács's critique of Max Weber's conception of social science. One may summarize that critique as follows. Weber more than any other German scholar of his generation tried to save the objectivity of social science; he believed that to do so required that social science be made "value-free" because he assumed that evaluations are transrational or irrational; but the value-free study of "facts" and their causes admittedly presupposes the selection of relevant facts; that selection is necessarily guided by reference to values; the values with reference to which the facts are to be selected must themselves be selected; and that selection, which determines in the last analysis the specific conceptual framework of the social scientist, is in principle arbitrary; hence social science is fundamentally irrational or subjectivistic.[31]

According to Lukács, an objective and evaluating social science

is possible provided social science does not limit itself to the study of arbitrarily selected "facts" or segments, but understands particular social phenomena in the light of the whole social situation and ultimately in the light of the whole historical process. "Historical and dialectical materialism is that comprehensive view in which the progressiveness and the rationally knowable lawfulness of history are expressed in the highest form, and in fact the only comprehensive view that can give a consistent philosophic foundation to progressivism and reasonableness."[32]

Hegel's attempt to demonstrate the progressive and rational character of the historical process was based on the premise that that process is in principle completed; for if it were not completed, one could not know, for instance, whether the future stages would not lead to the self-destruction of reason. Yet, according to Marx, the historical process is not completed, not to say that it has not even begun. Besides, Marx does not admit trans-historical or natural ends with reference to which change can be diagnosed as progress or regress. It is therefore a question whether by turning from Western relativism to Marxism one escapes relativism. "Historical materialism," Lukács had said,

> can and must be applied to itself. Yet this application of materialist method to materialism does not lead to complete relativism; it does not lead to the consequence that historical materialism is not the right method. The substantive truths of Marxism are of the same quality as the truths of classical economics according to Marx's interpretation of those truths. They are truths within a certain order of society and production. As such, but only as such, they possess absolute validity. This does not exclude the emergence of societies in which other categories, other connections of truth, will be valid as a consequence of the essential structure of these societies.[33]

This would seem to mean that the substantive truths of Marxism are true until further notice; in principle we know already now that they will be replaced by different truths. Surely, the Marxist truths will be "preserved" in Hegel's sense of the term: "the 'objectivity' of the truth accessible on the lower planes is not destroyed: that truth merely receives a different meaning by being integrated into a more concrete, a more comprehensive totality."[34] That is to say, Marxism will reveal itself as a one-sided truth, a half-truth. Lukács compares the truth of Marxism also to the truth of the ideologies of the French Revolution. Marxism is as true today as those ideologies were in their time: both make or made intelligible a historical situation in such a way as to render visible for contemporaries the root of their difficulties and to show them the way out of those difficulties. But while the ideologists of the French Revolution saw clearly the rottenness of the *ancien régime* and the necessity of a revolution, they were utterly mistaken about the goodness of the new society that their revolution brought to birth.

The application to Marxism is obvious: even if Marxism were the last word regarding the ground of the rottenness of capitalist society and regarding the way in which that society can and will be destroyed, it cannot possibly be the last word regarding the new society that the revolutionary action of the proletariat brings to birth: the new society may be as rich in contradictions and oppressions as the old society, although its contradictions and oppressions will, of course, be entirely novel. For if Marxism is only the truth of our time or our society, the prospect of the classless society too is only the truth of our time and society; it may prove to be the delusion that gave the proletariat the power and the spirit to overthrow the capitalist system, whereas in fact the proletariat finds itself afterwards enslaved, no longer indeed by capital, but by an ironclad military bureaucracy.

Yet perhaps Marxism must not be applied to itself and thus made relative. Perhaps its fundamental verities are objective, scientific truths the validity of which cannot be understood in terms of their conditions or genesis. Marxism can then be regarded as a final truth of the same dignity as the theory of evolution. Yet since other truths of great importance will be discovered in the future, the "meaning" of Marxism will radically change.

But perhaps Marxism is the final truth, since it belongs to the absolute moment in history in which the realm of necessity can be surveyed in its entirety and therewith the outlines of the

realm of freedom can come into view for the first time. The realm of necessity coincides with the division of labor. The realm of freedom emerges with the abolition of the division of labor. Yet the original form of the division of labor is "the division of labor," not in the generation of offspring, but "in the sexual act." [35] It would seem that the realm of freedom, if brought to its perfection, will be the realm of homunculi produced in test tubes by homunculi, if it will not be, as is more likely, the earth of "the last man," of the one herd without a shepherd. For, to quote Machiavelli, "as has been written by some moral philosophers, men's hands and tongue, two most noble instruments for ennobling him, would not have done their work perfectly nor would they have carried the works of men to the height to which they are seen to have been carried, if they had not been driven on by necessity": the jump from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom will be the inglorious death of the very possibility of human excellence.

But let us return to that school which is externally the most powerful in the present-day West, to present-day positivism. That positivism is logical positivism. With some degree of truth it traces its origin to Hume. It deviates from Hume in two important respects. In the first place, deviating from Hume's teaching, it is a logical, i.e., not a psychological, teaching. The supplement added by logical positivism to the critique of reason is symbolic logic and the theory of probability; in Hume that supplement was natural belief and natural instinct. The sole or chief concern of logical positivism is the logical analysis of science. It has learned through Kant, the great critic of Hume, or through neo-Kantianism, that the question of the validity of science is radically different from the question of its psychological genesis.

The second important respect in which present-day positivism deviates from Hume is indicated by the fact that Hume was still a political philosopher. More particularly, he still taught that there are universally valid rules of justice and that those rules are not improperly called Laws of Nature. This means that "he thought and wrote before the rise of anthropology and allied

sciences" [36] or, more precisely stated, before "the discovery of History." Hume still viewed human things in the light of man's unchangeable nature; he did not yet conceive of man as an essentially historical being. Present-day positivism believes that it can evade the problem raised by "the discovery of History" by the same device by which it frees itself from Hume's or any other psychology: through the Kantian distinction between validity and genesis. Yet Kant was enabled to transcend psychology because he recognized an a priori; and an a priori does not have a genesis, at least not an empirical genesis. Logical positivism rejects the a priori. Hence it cannot avoid becoming involved in psychology, in the question of the empirical genesis of science out of what precedes science. One cannot stop at simply trying to answer the question, What is science? One cannot avoid raising the question, Why science? or What is the meaning of science? Since positivism denies that there is a "pure reason" or a "pure mind," it can answer the question, Why science? only in terms of "the human organism." It must understand science as an activity of a certain kind of organism, as an activity fulfilling an important function in the life of that kind of organism. In brief, man is an organism that cannot live, or live well, without being able to predict, and the most efficient form of prediction is science.

This way of accounting for science has become extremely questionable. In the age of thermonuclear weapons the positive relation of science to human survival has lost all the apparent evidence that it formerly may have possessed. Furthermore, the high development of science depends on highly developed industrial societies; the predominance of such societies renders ever more difficult the survival of "underdeveloped societies." Who still dares to say that the development of those societies, i.e., their radical transformation, the destruction of their traditional way of life, is a necessary condition for those peoples' living or living well? Those peoples survived and sometimes lived happily without having an inkling of the possibility of science. While it becomes necessary to trace science to the needs of organisms of a certain kind, it is impossible to do so. For to the extent to which science could be shown to be necessary for man's living or living

well, one would in fact pass a rational value judgment regarding science, and we know that, according to positivism, rational value judgments are impossible.

Some positivists avoid the difficulty indicated by finding the rationale of science in democracy, without being deterred by the fact that they thus merely appeal to the dogmatic premise or the inertia of established orders and without paying attention to the complications alluded to by Berlin, or else by conceiving of science as one of the most thrilling forms of spiritual adventure, without being able to tell us what they understand by the spiritual, how it differs in their opinion from the nonspiritual, and, in particular, how it is related to the rational. Positivism grants that science depends on conditions that science itself does not produce. They are produced by the unintended coming together of various factors that may diverge as they have converged. As long as they are together, science may progress by virtue of something that looks like an innate propensity. Yet science is not autonomous; as the saying goes, thinking does not take place in a vacuum. What renders the autonomy of science questionable is not primarily the fact that science presupposes the availability of conditions external to science. If one conceives of science as a spiritual adventure, one implies that there are other forms of spiritual adventure; one cannot exclude the possibility that, just as science influences those other forms, science itself undergoes their influence. Furthermore, one must assume that the spirit changes as a consequence of its adventures, hence that the spirit may well differ from age to age, and hence that science may depend, in the direction of its interests or of its hypotheses-forming imagination, on the spirit of the age. In other words, one cannot help raising the question of the relation between scientific progress and social progress. Given the positivistic verdict regarding value judgments, positivism can no longer speak properly, or with an easy conscience, of social progress; but it continues, even if in a more or less surreptitious manner, the older tradition that believed in the natural harmony between scientific progress and social progress.

Stated generally, by virtue of the distinction between validity and genesis, positivism tries to treat science as autonomous, but it is unable to do so; that distinction merely prevents it from giving due weight to the question of the human context out of which science arises and within which it exists. Positivism treats science in the way in which it would have to be treated if science were "the very highest power of man," the power by which man transcends the merely human; yet positivism cannot maintain this "Platonic" understanding of science. The question of the human context of science, which positivism fails and refuses to raise, is taken up by its most powerful present-day opponent in the West, radical historicism or, to use the better-known name, existentialism.

Existentialism came into being through the meeting, which first took place in Germany, of Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's thought. While being related to these two illustrious names, existentialism is as nameless as positivism or idealism. But this is misleading. Existentialism, like many other movements, has a flabby periphery and a hard center. That hard core, or that thought to which alone existentialism owes its intellectual dignity, is the thought of Heidegger. In Heidegger's first great publication, the influence of Kierkegaard was indeed as powerful as that of Nietzsche. But with the increased clarity that Heidegger achieved afterward, it became clear that the root of existentialism must be sought in Nietzsche rather than in Kierkegaard: existentialism emerged by virtue of the "reception" of Kierkegaard on the part of a philosophic public that had begun to be molded by Nietzsche.

Nietzsche is *the* philosopher of relativism: the first thinker who faced the problem of relativism in its full extent and pointed to the way in which relativism can be overcome. Relativism came to Nietzsche's attention in the form of historicism—more precisely, in the form of a decayed Hegelianism. Hegel had reconciled "the discovery of History"—the alleged insight into the individual's being, in the most radical sense, the son or stepson of his time or into the dependence of a man's highest and purest thoughts on his time—with philosophy in the original meaning of the term by asserting that Hegel's time was the absolute

moment, the end of meaningful time: the absolute religion, Christianity, had become completely reconciled with the world; it had become completely secularized, or the *saeculum* had become completely Christian in and through the postrevolutionary State; history as meaningful change had come to its end; all theoretical and practical problems had in principle been solved; hence, the historical process was demonstrably rational.

The decayed Hegelianism with which Nietzsche was confronted preserved Hegel's "optimism" after having abandoned the ground of that "optimism," i.e., the completedness of the historical process. In fact, its "optimism" was based on the expectation of infinite future progress or on the belief in the unfinishable character of history. Under this condition, as Nietzsche saw, our own principles, including the belief in progress, will become as relative as all earlier principles had shown themselves to be; not only the thought of the past but also our own thought must be understood to depend on premises which for us are inescapable, but of which we know that they are condemned to perish. History becomes a spectacle that for the superficial is exciting and for the serious is enervating. It teaches a truth that is deadly. It shows us that culture is possible only if men are fully dedicated to principles of thought and action which they do not and cannot question, which limit their horizon and thus enable them to have a character and a style. It shows us at the same time that any principles of this kind can be questioned and even rejected.

The only way out seems to be that one turn one's back on this lesson of history, that one voluntarily choose life-giving delusion instead of deadly truth, that one fabricate a myth. But this is patently impossible for men of intellectual probity. The true solution comes to sight once one realizes the essential limitation of objective history or of objective knowledge in general. Objective history suffices for destroying the delusion of the objective validity of any principles of thought and action; it does not suffice for opening up a genuine understanding of history. The objective historian cannot grasp the substance of the past because he is a mere spectator, not dedicated or committed to substantive principles of thought and action, and this is the consequence of

his having realized that such principles have no objective validity. But an entirely different conclusion may and must be drawn from the realization of this objective truth. The different values respected in different epochs had no objective support, i.e., they were human creations; they owed their being to a free human project that formed the horizon within which a culture was possible. What man did in the past unconsciously and under the delusion of submitting to what is independent of his creative act, he must now do consciously. This radically new project—the revaluation of all values—entails the rejection of all earlier values, for they have become baseless by the realization of the baseless character of their claim, by which they stand or fall, to objective validity. But precisely the realization of the origin of all such principles makes possible a new creation that presupposes this realization and is in agreement with it, yet is not deducible from it; for otherwise it would not be due to a creative act performed with intellectual probity.

It is in this way that Nietzsche may be said to have transformed the deadly truth of relativism into the most life-giving truth. To state the case with all necessary vagueness, he discovered that the life-giving comprehensive truth is subjective or transtheoretical in that it cannot be grasped detachedly and that it cannot be the same for all men or for all ages. We can do no more than allude here to the difficulties in which Nietzsche became involved in trying to overcome the difficulties that afflict his solution. I have in mind his interpretation of human creativity as a special form of the universal will to power, and the question that this interpretation entails, namely, whether he did not thus again try to find a sufficient theoretical basis for a transtheoretical teaching or message. I have in mind, in other words, his hesitation as to whether the doctrine of the will to power is his subjective project to be superseded by other such projects in the future or whether it is the final truth. We limit ourselves here to saying that the movement of Nietzsche's thought can be understood as a movement from the supremacy of history towards the supremacy of nature, a movement that bypasses the supremacy of reason throughout or tries to replace the opposition between the subjec-

tive and the objective (or between the conventional and the natural) by the opposition between the superficial and the profound. Existentialism is the attempt to free Nietzsche's alleged overcoming of relativism from the consequences of his relapse into metaphysics or of his recourse to nature.

Existentialism starts where positivism leaves off. Existentialism is the reaction of serious men to their own relativism. Positivism is essentially the attempt to understand science; it acts as if it knew that science is the one thing needful or at any rate man's highest possibility. It conceives of science as essentially progressive, and hence it conceives of the future of scientific development as unpredictable *in concreto*. In fact, it conceives of science as capable of infinite progress. This character of science must, however, be traced to the character of the object of science. That object is essentially accessible to reason; otherwise there could be no science. But since it reveals itself to science only in an infinite process, one can say with at least equal right that it is radically mysterious. For he who teaches, for instance, that perpetual peace is the goal of an infinite process teaches, in fact, the perpetuity of war. Existentialism is the truth of positivism, since it teaches that being is essentially or radically mysterious and that the fundamental defect of metaphysics is the assumption upon which it is based—the assumption that being is as such intelligible.

Existentialism is, however, not merely the "pessimistic" expression of the same thing of which positivism is the "optimistic" expression. Positivism asserts that the goodness of science cannot be established by science or scientific philosophy: the choice of science, of the scientific orientation, and therewith also of the scientific "picture of the world" is not a rational choice; it is as possible and as groundless as the choice of any alternative orientation. These fundamental choices are not properly interpreted by scientific psychology, for scientific psychology explains those choices on the basis of a specific fundamental choice that is not necessary, viz., the choice of the scientific orientation. The fundamental phenomenon, the only phenomenon that is not hypothetical, is the abyss of freedom: the fact that man is compelled to

choose groundlessly; the fundamental experience, i.e., an experience more fundamental than every science, is the experience of the objective groundlessness of all principles of thought and action, the experience of nothingness.

Man and ultimately everything must be understood in the light of this fundamental experience. The specific manner in which man and man alone is, is directly constituted by the fundamental nothingness. That manner of being is called *Existenz*. *Existenz* is articulated by the analysis of *Existenz*, which is the fundamental part of philosophy. *Existenz* is authentic or inauthentic: authentic when it faces the fundamental situation of man, inauthentic when it flees from it. The analytics of *Existenz* contains, then, an ethics, even if only a formal ethics: to the extent to which one understands *Existenz*, one realizes the general character of the truly human. The ethics is formal since it is based, not on the nature of man, on man's beingness, but on the human situation or, somewhat more precisely, on man's manner of being. Hence, it does not say that the good life is the life according to nature, according to the nature of man, but it does say, in effect, that the good life is the life according to the essential character of *Existenz*. It does not say this, however, according to Heidegger's own authoritative declaration. For if the analytics of *Existenz* contained an ethics, its cognitive status would be the same as that of Kant's transcendental analytics of subjectivity; it would be an objective teaching or it would supply final knowledge, infinite knowledge. Yet the analytics of *Existenz* is necessarily based on a specific ideal of *Existenz*, on a specific commitment; for only committed thought can understand commitment and hence *Existenz*. In other words, existentialist philosophy is subjective truth about the subjectivity of truth or finite knowledge of man's finiteness.

Yet how can finiteness be seen as finiteness if it is not seen in the light of the infinite? These and similar difficulties seem to have led Heidegger to a very thorough revision of his doctrine. One may doubt whether through that revision the fundamental relativism was overcome. I can allude here only to one point, to Heidegger's teaching regarding historical truth. The interpreter's

understanding of a thinker is true if it understands his thought as he understood it. According to Heidegger this is altogether impossible; it is not even a reasonable goal of understanding. Nor is it possible, in his opinion, to understand a thinker better than he understood himself; true understanding of a thinker is understanding him creatively, i.e., understanding him differently from the way in which he understood himself. This understanding necessarily implies a criticism, a fundamental criticism of the thinker in question. According to Heidegger, all thinkers prior to him have been oblivious of *Sein*, i.e., of the ground of grounds. This assertion implies, in fact, the claim that Heidegger understands the great thinkers of the past in the decisive respect better than they understood themselves.

NOTES

1. Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 51.
2. *Op. cit.*, pp. 9, 11, 47.
3. *Op. cit.*, pp. 15, 16.
4. *Op. cit.*, p. 19.
5. *Op. cit.*, p. 32.
6. *Op. cit.*, p. 46.
7. *Op. cit.*, p. 14 n.
8. *Op. cit.*, pp. 36, 50.
9. *Op. cit.*, pp. 13-15, 48.
10. *Op. cit.*, pp. 39 n., 54, 57 n.
11. *Op. cit.*, p. 54.
12. *Op. cit.*, p. 38 n.
13. *Op. cit.*, p. 54.
14. *Op. cit.*, p. 50; italics mine.
15. *Op. cit.*, p. 57.
16. *Op. cit.*, p. 50.
17. *Op. cit.*, p. 50; italics mine.
18. *Op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.
19. *Op. cit.*, p. 50.
20. *Op. cit.*, p. 13.
21. *Op. cit.*, p. 57.
22. *Op. cit.*, p. 57.
23. Arnold Brecht, *Political Theory* (Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 263.
24. *Op. cit.*, pp. 264-265.
25. *Op. cit.*, pp. 549-550.

26. Cf. also p. 430.
27. Cf. pp. 101, 103, 125, 158, 462 ff.
28. *Op. cit.*, pp. 124-125, 130-131.
29. *Op. cit.*, pp. 78, 81.
30. Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (Berlin, 1954).
31. Cf. pp. 484-489.
32. *Op. cit.*, p. 456.
33. Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Berlin, 1923), pp. 234-235.
34. *Op. cit.*, p. 206.
35. Karl Marx and F. Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie* (cited from a new edition, Berlin, 1953), p. 28.
36. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, Modern Library edition, p. vii.